
Unexplored Territory or a Cross-Cultural Communications Nightmare: The Internet and Business Communication

By

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In the fall of 2000 I conducted a research project in partial fulfillment of a master's degree program. This project had to be directly related to my job, security assistance and defense cooperation, and my degree, information resource management. I chose to study the effect that cross-cultural relations had on communicating across the internet. The following is a summary of the results of this study.

Background

Over the past decade there has been an explosion in information technology and the use of the internet to conduct normal business communication. With most offices now wired for both internal and external communication, e-mail appears to be taking over our everyday lives. This technology boom has provided mixed results. On the positive side we are now able to communicate with anyone, anywhere in the world because time zones do not apply to electronic messages. Also, with the use of e-mail, there is a very structured audit trail that can be followed if a problem arises based on an electronic communication. On the negative side it seems as if personnel within an office would rather send e-mail to a co-worker in the office next door rather than actually talking to them face-to-face. This appears to have caused a decline in interpersonal and social skills within the workplace.

In DISAM's course offerings, we teach over 350 international students per year. Once students graduate from a DISAM course, they are provided with unlimited access to faculty members for follow-up questions, for research problems, or for advice on security cooperation issues via the telephone, facsimile, or through e-mail. The use of internet technology coupled with the use of e-mail has greatly increased the number of questions former students have posed and therefore, the number of possible communication errors has risen. Since the faculty cannot see or hear the international students, they cannot pick up on their body language or hear the inflections used in their words while asking a question. In this type of situation the chances of a miscommunication are greatly increased. As an example, when a person has a question, they send an e-mail to a DISAM faculty member who in turn can query several members of the faculty at one time on the issue. There have been several instances where former students have used this function and then become upset with the response they have received because they felt the faculty member did not fully understand the question or did not take the time to fully research the problem. In reality what happened was that the faculty member was not able to read key cultural pointers in the students' body language and spoken language so they did not really understand what the student was asking. Instead they researched the inquiry as they perceived it. The result of these miscommunications has been that the DISAM faculty, at times, appears to be somewhat less than capable when responding to these requests.

One of the key groups of people who have been affected by the increased use of the internet and the technology it represents are foreign service nationals (FSNs), who are citizens of a particular country who are employed by the U.S. government to fill certain positions within the American embassy in that country. These employees have the peculiar circumstance to spend part of their day in the American culture and to live the rest in their native culture. In the case of those

involved with security cooperation, it appears to be even more complicated because they are constantly using the internet to ask questions, working with security cooperation specific software programs, and participating in training related to their careers.

DISAM is bombarded with e-mail on a daily basis, much of which comes from former international students and from FSNs. The impression is that these e-mails are, at times, difficult to understand and have a cultural spin to them that is not always understood by the recipient. Specifically, when responding to e-mail over the past several years it seems as if I, and others, have upset international students and FSNs with our responses without knowing why. Often times something said in jest in e-mail is taken literally and leads to further cross-cultural problems. Exacerbating the issue is that with electronic communication the sender of the message is not able to hear the inflection of the receiver's voice or to see the receiver's body language to pick up on clues as to the receiver's response to the message. On the basis of this experience, this study was designed to investigate the belief that cross-cultural differences could negate some of the benefits of using e-mail for international communications. The researcher hoped that the study would highlight any problems with respect to communicating over the internet globally, and thus lead to reducing these problems.

What is Culture?

Culture is the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes beliefs, customs, and traditions of a particular group of people. Only people can "mean" something and that meaning can be traced to the sender's culture (McLaren, 1998). McLaren informs us that it is not so important what message is sent, but instead, what message is received. With English being the most important and widely used form of business communication, those using it must be careful to avoid bias and remain aware of the context of the message they are sending and receiving. The pitfall of this is that, when confronted with an uncomfortable situation, one naturally tends to fall back on one's own cultural upbringing (Neulip and Ryan, 1998). These authors state that there is always a degree of concern when meeting someone new, but that it becomes even harder to overcome this concern when the individuals are from different cultures. For many cultures the use of body language and other cultural pointers are far more important than words (Stag, 1998). He further goes on to state that emotional sensitivity and saving face are important to other cultures while Americans prefer to deal with a cost/benefit result void of emotional dealings.

Culture seems to have a profound relationship on trust when dealing with people from other cultures. Trust between employees and their customers can help reduce many business costs as well as enhance the relationships within the organization (Doney, Cannon, and Mullen, 1998). They go on to assert that trust is a by-product of risk. The ability to place oneself at risk is directly dependent on the person's societal norms and values, one's culture. When people share the same culture they are more likely to have a trusting relationship because they both follow the same path to build that trust. Finally, these authors pose an interesting twist. Trust may be the basis on which a culture is formed. Without trust as one of the basic societal norms the culture will likely not last.

Can communication across the internet and culture be tied together? In order for people to communicate they must have something in common (Agre, 1998). Agre believes that effective cultural exchange can occur across the internet, but that technology is not the answer in and of itself. If you place technology into an organization that currently has internal problems, the problems will continue to flourish. This tends to muddy cultural exchange on the internet (Peters, 1998). Peters believes that technology can overcome national boundaries and generate new, unique ideas, but only if individuals have a common starting point.

Ethnocentrism can also cause problems in inter-cultural settings. It is a quality of most every culture and can lead to great misunderstanding and ill will if it is allowed to go unchecked (Hilton and Kameda, 1999). These authors believe that very often individuals have stereotypes of those from other cultures and find it hard to be open to suggestions that go against those stereotypes. Although the preference is for face-to-face contact because of the nuances it allows, efficient and effective communication can still take place on the internet because most users are willing to take chances with their communication without threat of embarrassment.

Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of what I might find in my research, I conducted a review of recently published information that might pertain to the topic. I concentrated my research in four major areas including communication on the internet, cross-cultural relations, education across the internet, and computer-based training. Articles on all topics were readily available and showed the positive and negative viewpoints of all areas.

Once this literature review had been completed, the decision was made to survey all FSNs in the security cooperation arena to determine their perceptions and attitudes towards communicating via the internet. The reason that FSNs were chosen was threefold. First, they work in an environment in which they must deal daily with Americans, whose culture differs from their own. Second, most FSNs use e-mail on a daily basis to perform their standard job functions, and third, they were more likely to respond because they were informed that the results of the survey would be used by DISAM to better support the FSNs in the future.

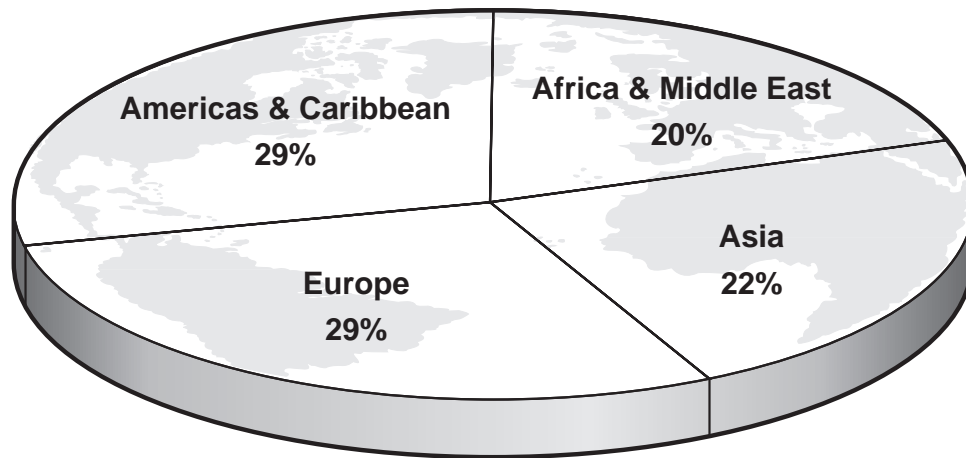
The survey was constructed using Perseus SurveySolutions for the web software and was placed on the DISAM web server for easy access. The survey consisted of one open-ended and fifteen structured questions, the latter based on a standard 5-point Likert scale ranging in values from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree. The questions were grouped into three main categories: communicating via the internet, basic computer user training, and education across the internet. These three areas were chosen because I believed there was a direct correlation between a users computer literacy, the fear, or lack thereof, of a structured education environment, and their use of electronic communication. An e-mail cover page was sent to ninety-one FSNs asking them to spend five minutes filling out the survey so that the results could be evaluated. A total of 40-FSNs responded for an overall return rate of 41 percent. The survey was made available on the web for two weeks.

Results

In order to evaluate the data in an appropriate manner, three demographic questions were asked of the respondents. Specifically, the respondents were categorized by gender, age, and geographic region of residence. The most balanced demographic response was found in the region of residence; therefore this demographic was used as the basis for analysis. There were twelve respondents from the Americas and the Caribbean, twelve from Europe, nine from Asia/Pacific, and eight from the Middle East and Africa (Figure 1).

The first statement dealing strictly with cross-cultural attitudes was "I think that all of my e-mail communications are completely understood by the recipient(s)." This statement yielded the most like responses to a single question on the survey with twenty-six respondents selecting agree. The overall mean was 4.05, giving at least a hint that communicating across cultures was not impaired. Africa and the Middle East posted the highest average with 4.25. Latin America and the Caribbean scored 4.17, Europe was at 3.92, and Asia/Pacific came in with a score of 3.89.

Geographic Region of Residence



Graphic Region of Residence

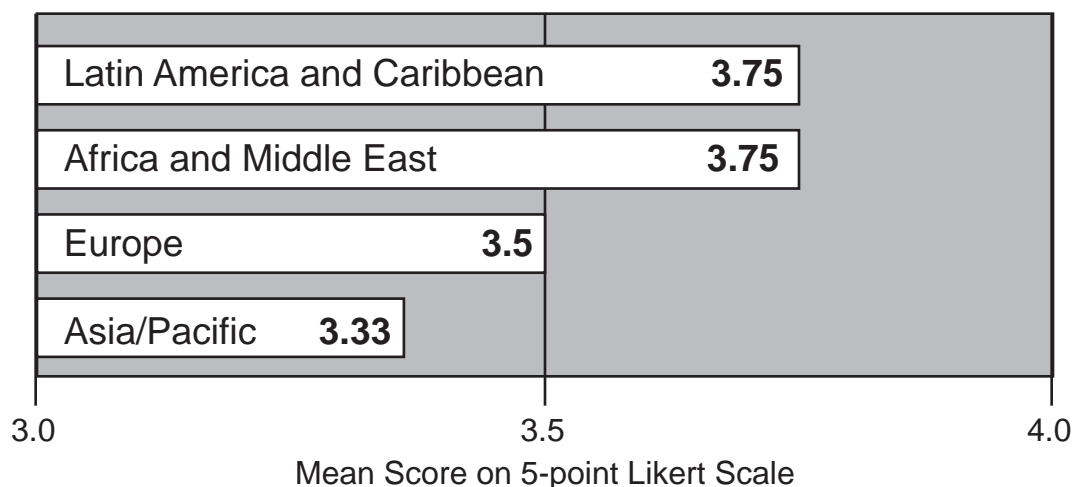
The FSNs were also asked to comment on the statement “I always understand e-mail messages sent to me.” The researcher believed that there would be a strong correlation between this statement and the previous one. This proved to be the case, with the mean for this question of 4.225 which correlates well with the overall mean of 4.05 on the previous answers. Geographic distribution of the answers shows Africa and the Middle East with a score of 4.50, Asia/Pacific at 4.44, Latin America and the Caribbean at 4.09, and Europe at 4.00.

One possibility for miscommunication could be related to the language abilities of the FSNs, since most of the communications are in English. When asked if “I am fluent in English,” the mean score of 4.225 indicated that the FSNs strongly believed themselves competent in their ability to read and understand English. The responses to this question were as follows: Europe with an average mean of 4.42, Latin America and the Caribbean with 4.27, Africa and the Middle East with 4.125, and Asia/Pacific with 4.00.

The research also presented two statements to determine the extent to which the FSNs had actually experienced difficulties in dealing with e-mail. The first, “I have never had a problem understanding the meaning of e-mail I have received,” generated an overall mean of 3.585. Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa and the Middle East tied for the highest mean score at 3.75. Europe had a mean of 3.50 and Asia/Pacific had a mean of 3.33. The second, “I never have problems communicating with someone from my own culture via e-mail,” elicited responses averaging of 4.125. Tabulation of responses to this question yielded remarkably different results, especially when comparing Africa and the Middle East with a high of 4.625 to the Asia/Pacific region’s low of 3.56. Latin America and the Caribbean had a score of 4.27 and Europe a 4.08. When taken together, it appears that the respondents are confident of understanding e-mail in general they are when assured that it the message is coming from someone within their own culture.

In addition to the Likert scale questions, there was also an open-ended request for comments about communicating on the internet. The responses emphasized two themes relevant to cross-cultural communications. The first theme was that of speed and convenience. Eleven of the respondents commented on this and essentially believe that the internet holds huge advantages over traditional communication methods for several reasons. First, it transcends all time zones,

which allows people in places such as East Asia to get their message out without having to call someone in the middle of the night. Second, using the internet to communicate allows the sender a chance to think about what they are saying before they actually send the message. According to three of the respondents, the ability to go back and edit the message prior to sending it has actually reduced the number of communication problems. Third, the sender and receiver now have an electronic record of all communications which can aid greatly in conflict resolution and when there is turnover within a position.



The second major theme that was raised was that of cross-cultural relations while communicating via the internet. Six respondents unanimously supported the theory that communication problems do occur, but not because two or more people are communicating electronically. Instead the reason is simply inherent in communication itself. Specifically, they state that they have communication problems on the telephone, in person, and via the facsimile machine due to language barriers and personality conflicts. In other words, the problem is with the communication itself, regardless of the medium used.

Overall the findings were fairly constant among all respondents for each question given. The strongest overall perception was to the question that stated, "I like to communicate using e-mail." This question had the highest average score of 4.55, approaching a rating strongly agree for all respondents. Based on these calculations it seems obvious that the foreign service nationals fully support communicating via e-mail.

Conclusion

The major overall conclusion drawn from this research project is that the hypothesized problems with cross-cultural relations while communicating via the internet do not really seem to exist in the security assistance and defense cooperation community. This finding surprised the researcher, as one of the primary reasons this project was undertaken was because there was an appearance that these problems were rampant.

The foreign service nationals believe that communicating across the internet is quick, easy, and in many cases simpler than communicating in person. There was also a strong belief amongst the FSNs that most e-mails that they send, as well as those they receive, are fully understood by both parties. Additionally, analysis of the open-ended question revealed that the respondents are not really experiencing any cross-cultural relations problems because of their use of e-mail. Specifically, in the FSN community, it appears as if communicating in this way has actually

lessened the number of problems instead of increasing them. Several FSNs stated that they thought there were fewer cross-cultural relations problems because they now review their e-mail before sending it and actually make changes to make the meaning clearer instead of saying the first thing that comes to mind.

I would like to extend my thanks and gratitude to all of the FSNs who took part in the survey. Without your support I never could have completed this project. For a complete write-up of the entire project please contact me at tom.dop@disam.dsca.osd.mil.

End Notes

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